

BEGINNERS GUIDE TO
THIRD-PARTY FOREST CERTIFICATION:
*SHINING A LIGHT ON THE
SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY INITIATIVE (SFI)*

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DOVETAIL PARTNERS, INC.



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Summary

There are several prominent forest certification systems in North America. One of these systems, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) is the focus of this article. For land managers and others considering forest certification, this report aims to introduce readers to the standards, governance structure and other basic elements of the SFI system.

Background

As outlined in the September 2004 issue of the Dovetail Partners newsletter (www.dovetailinc.org), interest in certifying natural resource-based products has grown dramatically over the last ten years. One can now find close to 30 national and international bodies that certify products as to their “green” attributes.ⁱ

The certification of forests and forest products is the leading sector in the environmental products certification movement with nearly 450 million acres of forest certified around the world and approximately 4,500 companies marketing certified productsⁱⁱ. The United States and Canada are leaders in the number of acres certified. This high level of participation is due in large part to flourishing national initiatives in each country, including the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) forestry program and the American Forest and Paper Associations’ (AF&PA) successful development of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), which has been adopted by the majority of major industrial landowners in the United States. The article in the last Dovetail newsletter described the workings of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the first body to certify forests for their social and environmental attributes. In this issue, we set out to describe the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).



SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY INITIATIVE®

Highlights of SFI Program Certification Requirements

- Consistent with international verification and auditing standards.
- Based on and fully compatible with ISO Procedures & Protocols.
- The initial re-verification shall occur within three years of the date of the verification and shall not exceed every five years thereafter.
- Periodic (annual) surveillance audits are required for all SFI Certifications where a program participant wishes to use an SFI on-product label.
- External audit summaries are required. At a minimum the summary shall include: audit scope and process; names and backgrounds of auditors; indicators used; and a summary of findings.
- 118 core indicators must be met for a successful third-party certification.
- Auditors must be accredited by a national standards body (e.g. ANSI/RAB or CEAA).
- Both paper (desk) and field audits are required.
- Requires professional foresters on every certification team.

http://www.afandpa.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Environment_and_Recycling/SFI/The_SFI_Standard/SFI_Certification.htm

SFI Principles for Sustainable Forestry

1. Sustainable Forestry
2. Responsible Practices
3. Forest Health and Productivity
4. Protecting Special Sites
5. Legal Compliance
6. Continual Improvement

2002-2004 Edition SFI Program

The SFI is considered by its critics to be an industry-backed response to the FSC.^{iv} When it was first formed in 1994, the SFI had no outside monitoring or independent certification process and the standards were arguably weak in comparison to certification systems already established at the time. However, beginning with the creation of a 3rd-party verification program in 1998, the structure of the original SFI program has evolved to have much more rigorous standards and a credible independent third-party auditing system.

As interest in forest certification has grown, the forest products industry in North America has generally divided into a number of camps: those that choose to ignore certification and wait for it to go away; those that choose to participate and certify under the FSC; and, others who feel industry could create a system that would better meet the industry's and the market's needs. The SFI program is an example of the latter.

The SFI program has a total of over 136 million acres enrolled, making it one of the largest sustainable forestry programs in the world³. Today 68 SFI program participants have completed 3rd party certification on over 90 million acres in North America. The SFI Program Participants, including AF&PA Member Companies and SFI Licensees are listed at the AF&PA website as well as a list of SFI Program Participants that have completed third-party certification.

In its 2003 annual report the SFI indicates that its “program is a comprehensive system of principles, objectives and performance measures developed by professional foresters, conservationists and scientists, which combines the perpetual growing and harvesting of trees with the long-term protection of wildlife, plants, soil and water quality.” The SFI Program Principles are seen as the heart of the SFI Standard. The SFI Objectives are intended to “translate these Principles into action by providing those who manage our forests with a specific roadmap to expand the practice of sustainable forestry and to visibly improve performance⁴”. The SFI program has 6 Principles, 11 Objectives, and 118 Core Indicators.

The SFI Standard (SFIS) outlines the Performance Measures and Indicators to which participants are audited and with which participants must comply to be recognized as third-party certified and to be able to use the SFI label. The SFI has one standard that is applied throughout the United States and Canada.

³ <http://www.aboutsfi.org/about.asp>

⁴ http://www.aboutsfi.org/about_principles.asp

SFI Governance

The AF&PA formed the Sustainable Forestry Board, Inc., (SFB) in July 2000 whose charter was to “*oversee the development and continuous improvement of the SFI program standard, associated certification processes and procedures, and program quality control mechanisms.*”⁵ In January of 2002, the SFB filed articles of incorporation to become a separate entity and obtain 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. The Sustainable Forestry Board oversees the SFI. The Draft SFI Audit Procedures and Qualifications (SFI – APQ) also assign the SFB responsibility for providing quality control of the auditors and audit procedures, including a process for annually witnessing at least one certification audit by each approved auditor⁶. To date, the SFI program participants fund the SFB. The AF&PA works directly with program participants on the implementation side of the Standard. They run the Office of Licensing and Label Use, guide the SFI Implementation Committees (SICs), and get involved with policy issues that affect certification in the market. AF&PA and the SFB have a “sister” relationship but distinct responsibilities. □

The SFB has a board of 15 directors with a balanced array of interests – one-third representing SFI program participants; one-third from the conservation and environmental communities; and one-third from the broader forestry community. The SFB is not a membership organization and directors representing the forest, paper and wood products industry are appointed by the AF&PA. The board elects the other ten directors. Directors serve three-year terms and may serve no more than two consecutive full terms. For any action to be passed by the board, a minimum of 80% of the directors present, which must include at least two representatives from each membership sector, must vote in support of the action.

⁵ <http://www.aboutsfi.org>

⁶ SFI Audit Procedures and Qualifications (SFI-APQ) Draft1, June 7, 2004

SFI Objectives:

Objective 1: Broaden the implementation of sustainable forestry by employing an array of economically, environmentally and socially sound practices in the conservation of forests – including appropriate protection, growth, harvest and use of those forest – using the best scientific information available.

Objective 2: Ensure long-term forest productivity and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, soil conservation, afforestation and other measures.

Objective 3: Protect the water quality in streams, lakes and other waterbodies.

Objective 4: Manage the quality and distribution of wildlife habitats and contribute to the conservation of biological diversity by developing and implementing stand- and landscape level measures that promote habitat diversity and the conservation of forest plants and animals including aquatic fauna.

Objective 5: Manage the visual impact of harvesting and other forest operations.

Objective 6: Manage Program Participant lands of ecologic, geologic, cultural or historic significance in a manner that recognizes their special qualities.

Objective 7: Promote the efficient use of forest resources.

Objective 8: Broaden the practice of sustainable forestry by cooperating with forest landowners, wood products, consulting foresters and Program Participants’ employees who have responsibility in wood procurement and landowner assistance programs.

Objective 9: Publicly report Program Participants’ progress in fulfilling their commitment to sustainable forestry.

Objective 10: Provide opportunities for the public and the forestry community to participate in the commitment to sustainable forestry.

Objective 11: Promote continual improvement in the practice of sustainable forestry and monitor, measure and report performance in achieving the commitment to sustainable forestry.

2002-2004 Edition SFI Program

The current SFB board is listed at the SFB website (www.aboutsfb.org). Constituents currently represented on the SFB include family forest landowners, forest product companies, forestry schools, conservation organizations, and forester associations. The SFB selects its own Executive Director, who is in control of the organization. The AF&PA staff provides support to the SFI.^v Besides the SFB, the SFI program also has an eighteen member, volunteer External Review Panel (ERB) that is primarily responsible for ensuring the accuracy and quality of the Annual Report. Current ERB members include representatives from a variety of organizations including Auburn University, the Canadian Federation of Woodlot Owners, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire's Forest, USDA Forest Service, University of Idaho, Society of American Foresters, Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry, Council on Environmental Quality, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Boise Cascade. More information about the ERB is available at: <http://www.sampsongroup.com/sfi/erp.htm>.

"The Sustainable Forestry Initiative ® (SFI) program is a comprehensive system of principles, objectives and performance measures developed by professional foresters, conservationists and scientists, among others that combines the perpetual growing and harvesting of trees with the long-term protection of wildlife, plants, soil and water quality. There are currently over 136 million acre of forestland in North America enrolled in the SFI ®program, making it among the world's largest sustainable forestry programs."

<http://www.aboutsfi.org/about.asp>

With decision making found solely within the Sustainable Forestry Board, the SFI is generally considered less participatory in its governance and less transparent in its reporting in comparison to other programs. While SFI requires that program participants that wish to become third-party certified develop an audit summary, these summaries are rarely available for review by outside interested parties. The SFI Auditing Procedures and Qualifications (SFI-APQ) document states that, *"The auditor shall work with the Program Participants to prepare the audit summary for public disclosure. The audit summary will be posted*

on the SFB website and available for public review." To date, no audit summaries for the 69 SFI 3rd Party Certified Program Participants are available at the SFB website.

SFI Certification for Products

The SFI system has developed four labels for products coming from different types of producers. These producer labels signify the degree to which the facility that produced the product participates in the SFI program and if they have successfully achieved independent, third-party certification to the SFI Standard. The SFI Office of Label Use and Licensing must approve individual label use.

Any manufacturer that uses the Primary Producers label must meet all of the following criteria⁷:

- Must be SFI Program Participants that are independently third-party certified to the SFI Standard;
- All primary sources must be accounted for as either certified to be in compliance with the SFI Standard or the American Tree Farm System® and/or be procured through a third-party certified procurement system;
- The certified procurement system may include material from neutral sources, such as recovered wood fiber, and from credible sources outside the U.S., where recognized independent third-party certification standards are not yet in place at the national level, that are: a) forest plantations; or b) other well-managed forests harvested in compliance with all relevant laws and regulations and generally accepted sustainable forestry practices;
- Additionally, at least one-third (by weight) of the total wood fiber content must come from sources certified to be in compliance with the SFI Standard and/or American Tree Farm System.

All Secondary Producers must meet all of the following criteria⁸:

- At least two-thirds (by weight) of the wood or fiber must come from sources that were certified to be in conformance with the SFI Standard or American Tree Farm System or from neutral sources, such as recovered wood fiber;
- Additionally, at least one-third (by weight) of the total wood fiber content must come from sources certified to be in compliance with the SFI Standard and/or American Tree Farm System;

SFI On-Product Labeling Program



Primary Producer

The Primary Producers on-product label, represented above, is intended for use by any SFI participant whose manufacturing facility acquires 50% or more of its material from the woods or that sells timber from their own land.

Secondary Producer

The three Secondary Producers labels, intended for use either by SFI Participants that acquire less than 50% of their raw materials from the woods or by entities not eligible for SFI Participation, because they purchase less than 5% of their material from the woods.

(1) Participating Manufacturer

A "Participating Manufacturer" is defined as a producer of finished forest products such as plywood, furniture, windows, doors, cabinets, etc. that has been certified to the SFI Program's On-Product Label Use Requirements Document.

(2) Participating Publisher

A "Participating Publisher" is defined as a producer of magazines, publications, catalogs, etc. that has been certified to the SFI Program's On-Product Label Use Requirements Document.

(3) Participating Retailer

A "Participating Retailer" is defined as a retailer of wood and paper products that has been certified to the SFI Program's On-Product Label Use Requirements Document.

http://www.afandpa.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Environment_and_Recycling/SFI/Office_of_Label_Use/Office_of_Label_Use.htm

⁷ www.afandpa.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Environment_and_Recycling/SFI/Office_of_Label_Use/Office_of_Label_Use.htm

⁸ www.afandpa.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Environment_and_Recycling/SFI/Office_of_Label_Use/Office_of_Label_Use.htm

- All material from outside the U.S., where recognized independent third-party certification standards are not yet in place at the national level, must originate from: a) forest plantations; or b) other well-managed forests harvested in compliance with all relevant laws and regulations and generally accepted sustainable forestry practices;
- Secondary Producers must provide independent, third-party certified evidence documenting content to qualify to use the SFI label;
- Secondary Producers that use only processed wood - that is, they use little (less than 5%) raw material to produce their product - may be licensed to use the SFI label without becoming an SFI Program Participant. This means that they are not certified to the SFI Standard, but their compliance with the label use guidelines has been independently third-party certified.

The SFI Accreditation process

The SFI keeps standard setting and accreditation processes strictly separate in accordance with the International Standards Organization (ISO) international protocols and procedures. The SFI recognizes certifiers that meet the certification and training standards set by the American National Standards Institute and the Registrars Accreditation Board as being eligible to verify conformance to the SFI standard. In addition, the SFI standard requires that the lead verifier on a project be certified as an Environmental Management Systems Lead Auditor, or equivalent, by a national accreditation body. Currently there are sixteen SFI certifiers and a list can be found at <http://www.aboutsfb.org/thirdparty.htm>.

SFI Certification Process

The SFI is the only forest certification program exclusively intended for large, North American ownerships. The SFI has been a U.S. oriented program with recent growth into Canada and has used a general guideline of 10,000 acres as the minimum property size at which the SFI standards are a good fit⁹. The SFI is, however, now pursuing recognition under the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes (PEFC), which would give it a more global reach. To address smaller acreages, the SFIS does have a interim understanding of mutual recognition with the American Tree Farm System.

Participants must conform to all components of the SFI standard that apply to their operations and audits are performed onsite at the applicant's forestland and place of business. After achieving certification, the initial re-verification must occur within three years and then every five years thereafter. There are no requirements for annual audits.

The process of certification under the SFI program begins with identifying an accredited certifier. Through a well-designed bidding process, it is possible to use part of the process as an important information gathering stage and an opportunity to take advantage of the competitive advantages of the various organizations qualified to perform SFI audits.

⁹ The SFI mutually recognizes ATFS (Tree Farm), for lot sizes less than 10,000 acres.

Minnesota Takes Home 6th Annual SFI® Implementation Committee Award

WASHINGTON, DC – For excellence in logger training, landowner outreach, and program recruitment, the Minnesota Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Implementation Committee (Minnesota SIC) was recognized during the SFI Annual Conference in Austin, TX. Acknowledging the outstanding work by the SIC in implementing the SFI program, AF&PA conferred its sixth-annual SIC award on the Minnesota committee.

Sept. 23, 2004

<http://www.afandpa.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&Template=/PressRelease/PressReleaseDisplay.cfm&PressReleaseID=554>

One unique approach that is available to land managers interested in both SFI and ISO certification is to pursue both through one assessment process. If a company pursues an ISO 14001 certification and uses the SFI Program Standard as their field performance standard in their environmental management system, they do not need to do a separate SFI audit¹⁰. The SFI program was purposefully designed to be compatible with ISO 14001 in recognition that Program Participants would benefit from synergies between the two.

Participation in the SFI program is a condition of membership for AF&PA. Since 1994, AF&PA has asked seventeen members to leave the association for failing to meet the SFI standard.

The SFI has two different dispute resolution processes. First, on a local level, anyone that has an issue with a Program Participant or the lands they manage can contact the SIC in that

area. Many SFI Implementation Committees (SICs) have toll free telephone numbers to facilitate communication of complaints. While the protocols for each specific SIC may differ, they involve an on-site investigation by a local professional and a report back to the complainant. An example of an SIC protocol for handling complaints can be found at www.virginiasfi.org. Issues may also be raised at the national level by contacting the SFB, the External Review Panel or AF&PA. The SFI Audit Procedures (SFI-APQ) require that the person with the complaint present the claim of non-conformance to the Program Participant. The Program Participant is then required to respond within 45 days and forward a copy of their response and the original complaint to their auditor. The auditor then includes a review of the complaint and response at the time of the next surveillance audit.

If a third-party challenges the validity of the certification of a Program Participant, the SFB is responsible if the Program Participant's response does not resolve the issue. Through a standing committee, the SFB Certification Appeals Subcommittee, an ad-hoc member is appointed to the issue. The committee reviews the information supplied by both the complainant and the Program Participant to decide if there should be a formal investigation. The committee is comprised of three people from the Resources Committee and the External Review Panel. One of the members must have regional expertise in the area of question. This group makes one of three possible decisions: The complaint has no merit and the case is dropped, the committee requests more information in order to reach

¹⁰ SFI Interpretations and Answers, <http://www.aboutsfb.org/interpret.htm>

a decision, or an investigation is necessary and the SFB appoints an Ad-hoc Certification Review taskforce to investigate the claim. The Ad-hoc group is a three-person group made up of a forester (with regional expertise), a regional environmental representative, and an auditor. All of these volunteers are required to be independent of the SFB, the involved parties and AF&PA. They review the supplied information, may visit the sites in question, conduct interviews with the parties involved, and produce a final report. Any further challenges would go to the SFB for review.

Some Things that Set SFI Apart

There have been many comparisons between SFI, FSC and other certification systems. Many of these studies can be found on the web and a bibliography of relevant articles is included in Appendix A. While there are many differences between the standards of the SFI and FSC, we will leave it up to the readers to make their own comparisons based on reading the two standards and a review of the many papers comparing the systems. It is worthwhile, however, to point out some differences that go beyond the standards and make the SFI unique.

There are some areas where the SFI is recognized to have considerable impact on promoting sustainable forestry. A significant strength of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) in comparison to other forest certification programs is its inclusion and emphasis on participants' contribution to research and education. The 2002-2004 SFI Standard includes a number of research efforts as SFI Performance Measures and Indicators. For example, Objective 3 includes that *“Program participants shall, individually, through cooperative efforts, or through AF&PA, provide funding for water quality research.”* Further research related Performance Measures and Indicators are also included in other Objectives. For example, Objective 4 states that *“Program Participants shall, individually, through cooperative efforts or through AF&PA, provide funding for research to improve the science and understanding of wildlife management at stand or landscape levels, ecosystem functions and the conservation of biological diversity.”* A common assumption is that being a member of

Organizations Supporting the Goals of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Program

*American Bird Conservancy
 American Forests
 American Tree Farm System
 American Legislative Exchange Council
 Arkansas Wildlife Federation
 Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, UBC
 Bat Conservation International, Inc.
 The Conservation Fund
 Conservation Federation of Missouri
 Council of State Governments
 Ducks Unlimited
 Forest Resources Association
 Izaak Walton League of America
 Longleaf Alliance
 Michigan United Conservation Clubs
 National Association of Conservation Districts
 National Association of Professional Forestry Schools and Colleges
 National Association of State Foresters
 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
 National Fisheries Institute
 National Tree Trust
 National Wild Turkey Federation
 National Woodland Owners Association
 Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association
 Northwest Regional Planning Commission
 PACE International Union
 Pulp and Paper Workers Resource Council
 Quality Deer Management Association
 Quail Unlimited
 Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation · Ruffed Grouse Society
 Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests
 Society of American Foresters
 South Carolina Wildlife Federation
 Southern Council of Industrial Workers, UBC
 USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
 Wildlife Habitat Council
 Wildlife Management Institute
 The Wildlife Society
 Tree Musketeers
 United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America
 United Mine Workers of America
 Western Council of Industrial Workers, UBC
[http://www.aboutsfi.org/about awards.asp](http://www.aboutsfi.org/about_awards.asp)*

AF&PA or supporting other institutions through direct or in-kind funding is adequate for meeting this standard. The SFI Interpretations document clearly states that membership in AF&PA alone is not adequate for meeting the intent of indicators that call for program participants to promote research. However, due to the variability in reporting of audit results, it is difficult for interested parties to verify compliance.

In relation to training and education, in the 2002-2004 SFIS, *“Training programs to address significant environmental aspects and impacts”* are included as an indicator under Objective 1 and training is also included in Objectives 4 and 5. In the draft 2004 SFI Standard participants are required to *“improve the practice of sustainable forest management by resource professionals, logging professionals, and contractors through appropriate training and education programs.”* Also, *“Program Participants shall require appropriate training of personnel and contractors so that they are competent to perform their responsibilities under the SFI Objectives and Performance Measures.”* More than 75,000 loggers and foresters have completed SFI sponsored training, and in 2002, trained loggers supplied 92% of the raw material to SFI program participants.

The draft of the 2005 Sustainable Forestry Initiative Standard is available at: www.aboutsfb.org/SFIS081204.pdf. More information about the 2002-2004 Edition of the SFI Program including the Program Overview, Standard, Verification/Certification Principles and Procedures, and the SFI Qualifications Criteria for Verifiers documents is available at: www.aboutsfb.org/sfi.htm. The 2002-2004 SFI Standard and Verification Procedures can be downloaded at: www.aboutsfb.org/2002_2004_SFI_Standard_and_Verification_Procedures.pdf.

Conclusion

This article has been written to provide interested parties with a basic understanding of SFI and its approach to forest certification to help reduce confusion. It is also meant to act as a base to perform more research into the SFI system by highlighting the body of work that has gone into describing SFI and comparing it to other systems.

With the growth of forest certification in the U.S. and globally, it is very likely that multiple certification systems are here to stay. Many view this as a positive development since it allows for choice and forces improvement of all the systems through competition. The SFI program, like forest certification in general, continues to respond to the demands of its members, the marketplace, stakeholders, and the forested resource. While the SFI has changed significantly and strengthened its standard and governance procedures in recent years, it continues to face the challenge of delivering on the credibility and accountability that is a defining characteristic of successful, market supported certification systems. If the SFI program is able to adequately enhance its standard in terms of environmental protections and social responsibility, overcome its reputation as an industry controlled program, achieve international recognition through the PEFC system, and improve the transparency of its governance and reporting, it is possible that the SFI will be able to overcome some of its critics and deliver both a system that improves the practice of forestry and enhances consumer confidence in wood products as sustainable, responsible materials.

ⁱ Searle, R., Colby, S., and Smith Milway, K. “Moving Eco-certification Mainstream. The Bridgespan Group. July 2004

ⁱⁱ UNECE Forest Products Annual Market Review 2003-4

ⁱⁱⁱ “Comparative Analysis of the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative Certification Programs.” Meridian Institute. Washington DC. October 2001

^{iv} Searle, R., Colby, S., and Smith Milway, K. “Moving Eco-certification Mainstream. The Bridgespan Group. July 2004

^v “Comparative Analysis of the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative Certification Programs.” Meridian Institute. Washington DC. October 2001

Phil Guillery has worked to link communities and conservation efforts for the past 17 years. Previously, Phil served as founder and director of the Community Forestry Resource Center and his work has focused on helping communities and family forests access resources to sustain their forests and develop meaningful markets for certified forest products. Phil has been closely involved with the development of certification and associated forest policy in the U.S. and internationally.

Phil has also worked with the SmartWood Program of the Rainforest Alliance, managing its Midwest program and leading forest certification audits. He has also co-authored a number of articles on the economics and marketing of responsible forest products in leading journals.

Phil holds a Master of Science degree in Forestry and a Master of Arts degree in Extension Education from the University of Minnesota, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Science Education from the University of Wisconsin.

Dovetail Publications:

In an effort to increase the credibility of forest certification, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the various certification approaches, and ultimately improve the practice of responsible forestry and the trade of responsible forest products, Dovetail Partners has developed this overview of the FSC approach. Dovetail has also produced a report that aims at highlighting the respective benefits of the FSC and the SFI certification programs. All Dovetail reports are available at www.dovetailinc.org. Dovetail welcomes feedback and discussion on this and any of our publications.

Appendix A: Bibliography

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